**Sooner Rather Than Later**

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/38722695.

| | |
|---|---|
| Rating: | General Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | Other |
| Fandoms: | Hannibal (TV), Polar (2019), Hannibal Extended Universe - Fandom |
| Relationship: | Will Graham/Duncan Vizla \| Black Kaiser |
| Characters: | Will Graham, Duncan Vizla \| Black Kaiser, Will Graham's Father, Will Graham's Dogs, Original Child Character(s), Molly Graham |
| Additional Tags: | Alternate Universe, Pregnancy, Birth, labor, Genderfluid Character, they/them pronouns, Domestic Fluff, Fluff and Angst |
| Language: | English |
| Series: | Part 6 of Two Loners and a Baby |
| Stats: | Published: 2022-05-01 Completed: 2022-06-04 Words: 16,305 Chapters: 4/4 |

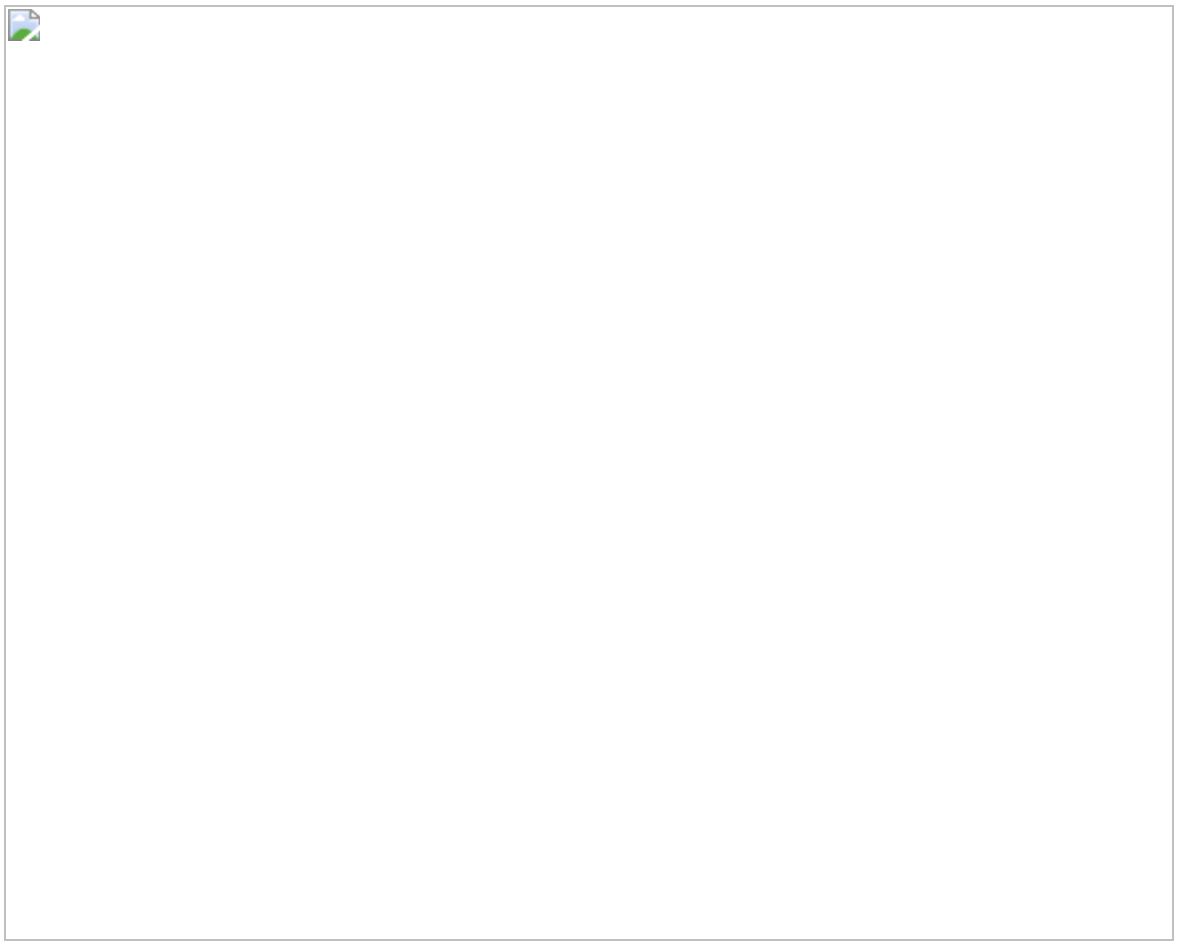
# Sooner Rather Than Later

by transcryptidone

Summary

Our little family was supposed to be having their first visit with Will's dad...but the twins have other plans. :)

# Chapter 1



“It’s early.”

Duncan shifts in bed, groaning when he both feels his hand and doesn’t. He can only sort of tell that his fingers uncurl when he tells them to, but it will pass. The numbness will give way to tingles as the blood returns to a hand that was bent oddly and squished in his sleep. The feeling is already returning as his eyes crack open and do their best to adjust to the dark. There’s whimpering coming from the crib so he says, “I’ll get them."

“Will you bring them?” Will asks, voice muffled by a pillowcase and gritty with sleep. The sound is cast over their shoulder as they lie on their side, more pillows surrounding them every which way.

With all of the pillows, two people, and two babies still nestled within Will’s womb, Duncan is not sure there’s enough space left in the bed for Juniper too. But as Juniper’s whimpers get a bit louder, he knows this is the window of opportunity that precedes full on wailing, so he just says, “Sure.”

“Okay,” Will murmurs.

Will nuzzles their cheek back into their pillow as he sits up in bed and, as he rises to his feet, he can hear them groan as he groans too. While it's a few aching muscles that have him grumbling, Will's challenge is one Duncan breezed through with relative ease. He has no idea what it's like to carry their twins all day and all night and to be so heavy with them that just turning over in bed is a feat. And so, every night he tucks pillows behind their legs and between their knees and bends himself every which way to take what space is left on the mattress. But Will is strong and stubborn and, even if it takes some pain and complaining, they'll be turned over by the time he's back with their baby in his arms.

Apricity rises with sunrise, but like juniper trees live year-round, Juniper's waking and sleeping doesn't depend on where the sun is in the sky – or the universe for that matter. The only center to their system, the one they brighten for is Will. As Duncan reaches for them, Juni raises up their arms with insistent jerkiness. As his eyes adjust to the dark, he can see that Will holds their arms out with the same determination and demand. And even as Juniper wriggles, Duncan lowers them slowly and surely until Will and Juni can be within each other's reach again.

"Hi, precious baby," Will says with a laugh as Juniper's clumsy, sleepy enthusiasm has their forehead colliding with Will's nose. They press a kiss to Juni's head at their hairline as they try to scooch and shuffle in bed to create a space for baby and belly. "A sweet, little Perry Berry."

As Juniper huffs and sighs, Duncan smiles and lies down on their other side opposite Will. His arm is bent and wrist too and he knows already that he'll wake up numb again, but he doesn't really mind. He sets one hand on top of Will's where it rests against Juni's back and he murmurs to the both of them, "Go back to sleep."

His eyes slip closed in the dark and, as Juniper shifts and wriggles, he waits for them to settle in while doing his best to pretend he's already fallen asleep. He must do a good job pretending because–

"Morning!"

Because when he opens his eyes again, it seems like he'd barely closed them, tricking himself into falling asleep in a blink of an eye. But where Juni whimpers before wailing, Apricity simply yells without much warning. Particularly in the morning. She makes him wonder why it is that kids wake up so invigorated and adults wake up so half-asleep when it's the adults that have to go to work. Maybe that's why.

His hand got pinned under Juni when they rolled onto their back. He rubs his thumb against the back of his hand and rubs away the numbness and the indentations that match the fabric of Juni's shirt. He turns away from where Will and Juni sleep with snuffles and snores and maybe a bit of drool to face his little girl with curls wild from bedhead. "Quiet voice, please. Zazzy and Juniper are still sleeping."

Apricity whispers just as quietly as she can, which still amounts to something just as loud as Duncan's normal volume, and she insists, "We have to get ready, Daddy."

“Breakfast comes first,” he tells her as he shifts as carefully on the mattress as he can so as not to jostle the bed too much. “Can you tiptoe or should I carry you?”

Apricity holds her arms outstretched and Duncan scoops her up as he rises to his feet. Although he can’t hold her quite as easily as he had Juniper so few hours ago, she still perches against his hip just fine. Even so, he might hold her a little tighter with the memory of when he could hold her in just his two hands. She’s grown big enough to no longer sit in a highchair and she not only eats solid food but can be asked, “What should we have for breakfast?”

She can sit at the table and reliably reply: “Not oatmeal.”

“Save the oatmeal for me and Juni,” Duncan agrees easily with a nod as he reaches into the cabinets to grab what essentials he already knows he’ll need: a spoon, a bowl, a mug, a cup. He sets the cup in front of her with some water as he raises one brow ever so slightly and asks, “What should we make for you?”

She takes a moment to think and looks so much like Will that Duncan expects she’s imagining the look and the taste of every option they might have to offer. “Toast,” she says after she’s made her study. “With apricot jelly.”

Duncan hums and states, “Good choice.”

He turns around to accumulate every other odd and end: a plate, a knife, bread, and jelly. A couple slices are popped in the toaster, locked and loaded. He can hear the hum of the coils as he opens the bag of ground coffee beans and dumps them into the coffee maker.

Apricity gulps some of her water and brushes her hand against her mouth and then wrinkles her nose as she asks, “How long until we leave?”

“After everyone has breakfast and gets dressed,” he answers as the coffee machine bubbles, hisses, and rumbles.

“Can I wake up Zazzy?” she asks, blinking wide-eyed and with barely any crusties at the corners. Her cheeks are still flushed from nuzzling them in her pillowcase and getting warm and toasty under the *Big Sister Blanket* that Molly made her, which is essentially a quilt.

“No,” he answers as he leans back against the counter and crosses his arms over his chest. He tips his chin as he looks in her shining eyes and at the tip of a nose that scrunches just like Will’s and he thinks of Will’s expression smoothing over with some much sought-after sleep. “There’s no rush,” he tells her as her toast pops up just as insistently as the one who will eat it. “Plenty of time for coloring.”

At the mention of coloring, her existing energy is doubled by even more excitement. She bolts from her seat to where her plastic bin of crayons and pencils is kept next to pads of paper in all sorts of colors and sizes. “I’ll make something for my grandpa!”

“Okay,” he says as he spreads butter and jelly on each slice of toast. “Just remember to keep your voice quiet, please.”

Apricity nods her head and her hair is almost windswept, like if Will rolled down the car windows and the rushing air whipped their hair into knots. Duncan sighs with the recognition of how many knots might be tangled in that thick hair of hers. Maybe if she's distracted enough with her coloring, she won't mind it being brushed too much. But maybe that's just hopeful thinking. That's a hurdle to encounter later. For now, she's content bringing a piece of muted yellow construction paper with a torn edge and her bucket of coloring supplies to the table. Apricity starts in on her coloring, taking occasional bites of her toast and starting with the edges so she'll eat her least favorite part first and her favorite part last.

As he watches her and sips his black coffee, he lets his mind wander. She sips her water, eats her toast, and scribbles and it's all so surreal. It's in these early morning hours when he's still shaking off sleep that he notices the surrealness most. Mornings humble him. The slowness of a slow day reminds him to appreciate anything that might usually get rushed by on the days when he's rising to descend into the woods in pursuit of lumber to then deliver. Winter is his busiest season, naturally, and he hasn't had as many slow mornings recently as he would like.

"Morning!"

He's pulled back from drifting into a waking dream, not quite asleep but off on a tangent. His reflexes have him snapping back to attention quickly and standing up a bit taller. Will pads towards their little kitchen area with footsteps muffled by cozy socks. Juniper is held, scrunched up to fit above Will's belly and tucking their face against Will's neck.

"Good morning, Miss Priss," Will says as they uncurl one hand cradling underneath the weight of their belly – already considerable without another, much bigger baby on top of it. But still, they keep their balance as they reach out to pet against Apricity's wild hair.

"Morning, Juni!" Apricity says as she tickles a finger against the bottom of one of Juniper's feet.

Juniper shakes their head where it's buried against Will's neck and jerks their foot away from their sister's early morning playfulness. Will clicks their tongue and pats their hand against Juni's back as they tell Apricity, "Juni's still waking up."

Apricity leaves her baby sibling be in favor of reaching for her cup and taking a long, loud sip that has Duncan refilling the cup as soon as she sets it with a clatter against the tabletop. As he bends forward to set the cup back in front of her, Will wraps their hand around his arm. Their fingers turn from touching and appreciating to squeezing in a sudden jolt and, when Duncan blinks towards them, he just knows.

"We'll be right back," Duncan says to Apricity, though she barely listens. She keeps on coloring what either might be what she thinks her grandfather should look like or a wizard from one of her favorite movies in the box across the street from the shop. He nudges her plate with half eaten toast and reminds her, "Eat your breakfast."

He and Will retreat to close themselves in the one room that might offer occasional privacy: the bathroom. Apricity will let herself in but at least that still means walls and doors will muffle the sound until then. It's a tight squeeze just as the bed was a tight squeeze and so

many other ways they've noticed that their home, which once felt huge and vast, might now not be quite big enough. Maybe the twins feel the same way.

"Fuck," Will says as soon as the door is closed. Then they lay a hand over Juniper's ear and whisper, *"Fuck."*

Duncan watches as Will shifts their weight from foot to foot and is struck by a memory of an experience he could never and would never keep far from the front of his mind. It's the memory of Will standing in their bathroom, pale and nearly shaking. He remembers the moment it sank in that their long-awaited and much beloved baby was on her way. So much could have gone wrong, but, in the end, she came into the world so beautifully. And so did Juniper, although far less dramatically.

"I'll call Molly," he says.

They always call Molly. The first time as a desperate plea for someone who might know what to do. The second time so she could meet them at the hospital. And both were a relief. Both times, they were met with someone who told them what they needed to hear: *you can do this.*

"What about my dad?" Will asks as their brow furrows and their teeth bite at their bottom lip the way he's learned means a contraction is building.

"I'll call him too."

Will sighs and shifts their hold on Juni, who still keeps their face tucked against Will's neck. "He'll be pissed."

"He'll be fine," Duncan says as he reaches to take Juniper so that Will won't add more muscle aches to their list of pains.

"Go to Daddy," Will says in anticipation of Juni's complaints. And though Juni whimpers and tries to cling, they do allow their parents to pass them from one set of arms to the other. They can tuck their face against Duncan's neck just as well until they're ready to be fully awake. "What about Apricity?" Will questions as they dig both of their free hands into their hair. "We had the whole talk and everything."

"We'll talk to her again," Duncan says. "What else can we do?"

Will goes still, no longer shifting restlessly. It all drains away. They go pale and flushed at once and lean back against the sink to brace themself. Only the furrow in their brow twitches and a hiss ekes its way between their teeth.

"Za!"

Juniper jerks out towards Will and it's only thanks to Duncan's reflexes that he could keep them from toppling over. But their soft, squishy little fingers still reach out, flexing and clenching in a pudgy fist. Will sighs and gives them a few fingers to cling to. To Duncan's eye, Will and Juniper are each as calmed and on edge as the other. This is how he knows for sure that even if Apricity could be nearby for a birth, Juni couldn't be.

Will's other hand rubs over the shape of their belly, stretching the fabric of their soft cotton dress with the drag of their palm. "It's early."

"We knew it was possible," he reminds them. As soon as they were told it was *twins* instead of another singleton, they were told these babies might come sooner rather than later.

"They were supposed to keep cooking," Will argues, looking down at their belly as if registering their complaints directly to the little ones who decided to be in a rush.

Duncan shifts his hold on Juni to place one hand over Will's on their belly and still Will's anxious rubbing and squeezing against the swell. "They've cooked enough."

Although they're not near the due date, the twins – and Will – have made it past the minimum they were told by the doctors. They'd marked it off on the calendar with relief. And sighed with relief again with each additional week. Although they might have liked more time, this part isn't really up to them. The babies will come when they will; Duncan and Will should probably know that better than anyone.

"Za!"

Will does their best to smile at Juniper and though Duncan can see how the smile is tight and lopsided, Juniper settles just a bit. They yank at the collar of Duncan's shirt and flail in his arms and it makes Will's smile a bit more genuine. "Okay," they concede. "Alright."

Duncan leaves Will in the bathroom, taking Juniper with him so that Will can have that last bit of alone time. After that, there will be doctors and nurses and even after they're home again – whenever that is – there will be two more kids to want their attention at any given moment and at all hours of the day. And that's not to mention the dogs. He lets their pack of dogs out on the way to the phone. Juniper squeals in excitement as the dogs rush by and a gust of cold air pours in through the door. Whether it's the dog yips or the crisp air, Juni has been successfully convinced to wake up a bit more.

He picks up the phone and dials a number he knows from memory, pinning the phone between his shoulder and ear as it rings. It keeps on ringing as he sits Juni in their highchair and eyes the piece of toast with all the crust bitten off but forgotten before Apricity got to the part she actually likes. He gives the plate a tap with his finger and gives her a look while he waits through another ring.

Just when he might think he'll be forced to leave a voicemail, Molly answers cheerily, "Hey!"

"Hello," he says as he stirs Juni's oatmeal and then blows away some of the steam so that Juni might actually eat it sometime soon.

"Did Will change their mind about the kids?" she asks.

She'd both assured them that the visit with grandpa would go fine and reminded them that she'd watch the kids again if Will wanted. It wasn't a spoken agreement, but he suspects his and Molly's thinking are one in the same: one by one, take on each and every one of the

complicating factors clouding Will's thinking so that they can have some pf the weight of the storm off their shoulders and bring sunnier days to their outlook.

"No," Duncan replies as he tentatively sets the bowl of oatmeal and spoon in front of Juni. He watches them assess what they've been given and sighs when they dig their finger into it and decide it's just right. He brushes back the hair that hangs in his face and murmurs, "Well, sort of."

"Uh oh," Molly says with a lilting intonation. "What now?"

Duncan glances at the kids and walks back towards to the side door to let yipping dogs back in. He unhooks one of many hats hung on pegs by the door and pushes his hair back one more time before sliding the hat on top to make it stay put. With another glance over his shoulder towards his kids, he turns back and murmurs, "The twins are coming."

Molly laughs in the light and airy way she does sometimes, usually throwing back her head and sending her blonde bangs askew. "Your kids really do have a flair for timing, don't they?"

"Yeah," Duncan says with his own huffing sort of laugh. "They do."

"Hands feeling steady?" she asks and he can easily imagine her teasing smile too.

She'd helped to steady his hands for everything that was involved with bringing Apricity into the world, from checking Will every so often to catching her when one last push had her almost seeming to tumble out. The doctors and nurses at the hospital when Juni was born made it all look so easy and so simple. It was almost surreal to only need to hold Will's hand and stand by their side. Molly seemed to see that too. He could feel her eyes on him as time ticked by and the contractions got harder and longer. When his hands started to tremble from the surreality of it all and the echoes of old worries resurfaced, Molly put her hand on his shoulder and brought him back from that moment in time when it was do or die.

Duncan rubs his thumbs against the bags under his eyes as he grumbles, "I still need a smoke."

"I should tell you not to," Molly says with a laugh. "But you deserve it, Duncan, really. Honestly."

"Thanks, Molly," Duncan replied and means it really, honestly, too.

Molly lets her compliment sit for a moment and settle in and then carries on the same jolly way as she asks, "When should I expect you?"

Duncan returns to watching over the gloopy mess and nibbled bread. He wipes Juni's chin and gives Apricity's plate another nudge. "We still have breakfast and getting dressed to do."

"Alright," Molly replies easily. "See you later."

"See you," he echoes just before hanging up.

He takes the phone from between shoulder and ear and just after pressing the button to end the call, starts on another. There's a slip of paper on the fridge with the number for Will's dad. He checks twice to make sure he's typed it in right before he presses the last button to make the call. When it rings once, he wouldn't mind an excuse to have to leave a voicemail.

"Hello?" answers the rough, rasping voice of his might-as-well-be father-in-law.

"It's Duncan."

Will's dad hums and coughs. "Mornin'."

"We won't be able to make it today," Duncan says, straight-forward and straight to the point. Will's dad – *Bill* – doesn't say anything – or, if he does it's lost in a bunch of rustling noises, so Duncan says what should be enough to explain everything: "The twins are coming."

"Oh, um," Bill says, faltering the way Will does in the very rare instance that they get caught off-guard. "Congrats. That's great."

"Thanks," Duncan says. "We'll find another time for you to see the kids."

"Sure," Bill states. "Tell Will I said good luck."

"Sure," Duncan remarks and hangs up.

He sets the phone down on the counter and starts on oatmeal for himself. The microwave is still whirring when Will comes in wearing a new change of clothes, leaving him wondering if their water broke or if they wanted to get ready to go sooner rather than later. Their eyes look first towards the phone and then quickly blink between the kids. As they move to stand by his side, it's like a squirrel trying to not get noticed by one of the dogs. Their touch to his arm is much gentler this time, though he can see how sweat has started to dampen the curls at their hairline.

"Was he mad?" they ask, glancing at the phone once more.

"He said to tell you good luck," Duncan states as he rubs the back of their neck below the collar of their plaid button up and feels how sweat has gathered there too.

"I'm not sure how much of it is about luck," Will remarks with a laugh as they let their head drop forward to give Duncan more access to their nape and where they hold tension in their neck. When they shiver, he presses his thumb a little more firmly against the ache he unknowingly bumped into, working it through with his touch as Will has and will continue to work through the aches and pains that rack and ravage their body.

"You should eat something," he reminds them.

Will shakes their head ever so slightly and replies, "I don't think I have the stomach for it."

"Toast!" Apricity interjects, making a show out of taking a bite of her own, taking such a big bite it leaves a glob of jelly at both corners of her mouth. As she chews, she smiles and at

least she keeps her mouth closed. The remaining chunk of bread and jelly is held out towards Will and, even if it's a half-gnawed piece of toast, at least she's interested in sharing.

Caught up in their sister's excitement, Juniper adds, "Za!"

"Alright, alright," Will says, holding up their hands in surrender and smiling wide enough to show their teeth, a smile they give easiest and most often to their kids.

As Duncan is struck with an aching love in his heart, he kisses their hair by the crown of their head. "I'll make you some."

"Thank you," Will says and then looks at Apricity's toast offering, raising an eyebrow as they tell her, "That means you can eat your own."

Apricity takes another bite under Will's watchful gaze and blinks her sweet wide eyes as she asks, "Then we leave?"

Duncan drops another couple of pieces of toast into the toaster and brushes the crumbs off his palms as he turns back towards her. "Our plans have changed," he tells her gently. He keeps his tone clear, but kind. "The twins are coming."

"But we're supposed to meet my grandpa!" Apricity protests nonetheless, her big wide eyes welling up already.

"April showers," he carries on with just as much care. He kneels so that he can look her in the eye and on her level and explains, "You have to wait to meet grandpa because the twins want to meet you first."

Her bottom lip pouts and wobbles as more tears well and push a few drop down her round cheeks. "I want to do both."

"I know you do," Will soothes. Kneeling isn't an easy feat, so they settle for petting their hand along her mess of hair. "But that's a lot of excitement for just one day."

"I'll take a nap," she offers and pleads, *"I promise."*

"That's a very good negotiation, Miss Priss," Will says with a soft smile. "But I'm afraid we can't budge on it."

"We'll take you to Molly and Wally's so you can spend time with them until the twins are here," Duncan reminds her to ease the blow. "Just like we talked about."

"But," Apricity protests, "But what about meeting my grandpa?"

"I don't know," Will admits, surely something they've worried about too. They arrive at a shrug and simply state, "We'll have to figure that out later."

Apricity uses clumsy hands to wipe away her tears and still more shine in her eyes as she laments, "I was excited."

As Apricity cries, Juniper whines and whimpers, bottom lip wobbling too just like their sister's has and eyes shining with tears just like their sister too. Duncan rises to his feet to find a napkin so that he can remove some of the oatmeal gloop from their hands before scooping them up.

"I know you were," Will says, wiping away some of Apricity's tears and some snot with their sleeve. They tuck a curl of her hair beyond her ear as they reassure her, "It's okay to feel disappointed."

Apricity looks down at the art she's been working on with so much care and attention. A couple of tears have fallen to dot and put a damper on the sunny yellow paper. She shows it all to Will as she makes her case one more time: "Made this for my grandpa."

"We can hold onto it," Duncan promises her. "Maybe you can make another for the twins while you're at Molly and Wally's."

"Maybe," Apricity says, sadness shifting to stubbornness as her pout deepens to a frown.

Will smiles at that stubbornness and so, knowing Will can't, Duncan kneels again to press a kiss to her head and jointly express her parents' affection for her clever, little mind. When Juniper's sticky fingers give her hair a yank, Apricity might make a sound akin to a yelp or a squawk. Either way, the sound sends Juniper into a fit of giggles. And though Apricity might fight to keep her frown, a smile still makes its way when Juni hiccups and snorts.

"See?" Will remarks pointedly. "We're counting on you as big sister to make sure Juni doesn't get too lonely while Zazzy and Daddy help the twins arrive safe and sound."

Apricity gives a long-suffering sigh and replies, "Okay."

Duncan presses another appreciative kiss to her forehead and murmurs, "Thank you, little girl."

"Big sister," she corrects with a huff.

Duncan hums and agrees, "Big sister."

# Chapter 2

Squeezing tighter and tighter, his fingers crush together with a sharp ache that descends down the outside of his pinky finger around his knuckle. Will squeezes as tight as they can until their fingers wrap so tightly around his hand that their fingertips touch their thumb. Their knuckles press against their skin hard enough to turn it white and the same could be said for their other hand gripping the handrail with the same unwavering strength. Though the squeeze might be brutal, it doesn't last too long, fading away and disappearing into just the echo of an ache left behind and the shuffle of their feet across the floor once more.

"Might as well have met up with my dad," Will grumbles after the end of yet another contraction – but not any closer together.

Juni came so quick that this time they'd set off for the hospital anticipating the drive to Molly's and not wanting a baby – or two – deciding to come on the road. The thought made him thankful that Apricity didn't come as early as these twins have and risk being born when they were still driving in search of somewhere they didn't know.

When Will releases his hand in favor of pushing back a curl that's slipped out of their ponytail, he wiggles his fingers to get a bit of the feeling back and murmurs, "I'd rather be bored than stressed."

"Good, fatherly advice," Will says breathily as they brush the back of their hand across their damp forehead. They somehow manage to smile and frown at once. It's in the furrow of their brow and slight smile to their lips and then they even add something musing to their tone, "When did that happen?"

Duncan hums. "I don't know."

He doesn't know how he knows the way to be a dad. He doesn't know how he's supposed to know if he's doing it right or if his advice is any good. For himself or others. He just…loves his kids. He probably has since the moment he knew Apricity existed and that he needed to put her first. That was made all the easier by the way that meant putting Will first too. There were sleepless nights staring at a motel room door with the heel of his boot propped against it just in case he accidentally fell asleep. That was a challenge. But there was still an ease in knowing exactly why he was doing it.

"Sometimes it's so strange to think about," Will says with a sigh, then whatever musing might have come next is cut off as they throw their head back with a hiss through grit teeth.

Duncan squeezes still slightly numb fingers against where Will's neck has tensed. Their hand nearly claws at his sweatshirt, scrambling to catch some fabric in their fist to tug at. He catches that floundering hand while the sounds of Will's stilted breaths cut through the air. His lips press to their sweaty hair as he questions, "Should we get you back?"

Will shakes their head while the contraction tapers off. Their sharp exhale tells him when the clench of Will's womb has finally eased. "No, they'll just say it's still not enough," they

grumble as they pull their hand away from the rail and rub at their belly over the hospital gown. Without the wall to brace them, they lean more of their weight on him. Their cheek presses to his chest as they say with a sigh, “I know how to feel for it.”

He sets his chin on top of their head and says without a doubt, “I know.”

Will’s instincts could have saved their daughter’s life. Their living, thriving, little girl might be proof of just that. All the things that could have gone wrong they’ll never know, because Will knew someway and somehow what needed to be done.

“So do you,” Will says and then groans as their knees bend and their hips rock. “I wish we could have done this at home.”

Duncan looks down the drab, sterile hallway with others shuffling and hustling by and thinks that even though it had been terrifying to do it on their own the first time, it was at least cozier. Felt more like a baby was being born into a *home* than an *establishment*. He closes his eyes as he hums and agrees, “Me too.”

“Maybe become a midwife before the next one,” Will suggests – would be teasing if they’d had the breath for it.

“If it is just one,” he teases in their place.

Will’s laugh sends a shudder through their frame that ends as they groan, “Oh, *fuck.*”

As Will squeezes his hand, Duncan holds them close. He breathes in and out slowly and surely the way Will needs to. The grip on his hand squeezes tighter as sharp, harsh puffs of hot air seep through his sweatshirt to give his skin a taste of how soaked to the bone and burning up Will must feel. There’s a trembling that he thinks might come from Will, but he could just be imagining it. There’s been once or twice when he wasn’t sure. He’s checked on Will before only to find that they seemed perfectly fine.

As Will has many times before, they brush off the pain like they brush their fingers against a wrinkle in their hospital gown. The wrinkle deepens with each exhale and disappears when Will’s inhale pushes their belly farther out. But there’s only so much air Will can pull in before it comes rushing out again in a sigh. “Bodies really are amazing, aren’t they?”

“Yours is,” he replies and, in truth, it’s an understatement. Especially now. Their body has given and grown and given and grown and they’ve never given up.

“Sweetheart,” Will nearly croons, tipping their head up so they can be sure he sees their smirk.

Will's grip on his hand has become more of a cradle as they move his hand for him to press his palm against a curve that will be gone faster than it took to create – even if it *feels* like this part is a lot of waiting around. Will guides his hand as they have before when feeling for kicks and even when they move their hand away, he wouldn’t dare wander. Their pull on the back of his neck is one he also follows without hesitation until their foreheads knock against each other lightly.

“Our bodies have made brand new *people,”* Will muses, evoking that sense of trying to articulate the unfathomable thing that Duncan feels just the same and also couldn’t name.

“And they’re amazing,” he agrees, thinking of Juni’s squeals, smiles, and silliness and of Apricity, her artwork made for a grandpa she doesn’t even know, and the way that doesn’t matter in her mind even a little bit.

Will turns just a bit more until the two of them can face each other and forget the rest of the world exists. Will grabs handfuls at the back of his sweatshirt, gripping in fists and twisting as their teeth dig into some more fabric by his shoulder. But even with the muffle of their own making, he can still hear the deep rumble of their pained moan. That fabric is damp to the touch when Will’s gasp leaves them open-mouthed and heaving air. They press their forehead to his sternum and shakily implore, “Keep going.”

“They’re strong and bright,” he goes on. Bright like the brightest stars in the night sky, bright like the sunlight that trickles between leaves in a canopy. He digs his fingers into Will’s lower back where he’s been told to and smiles into their hair as he remarks, “And they’ve got a little attitude.”

Will nods their head jerkily and huffs broken breaths. Some of those staccato breaths catch in Will’s throat and bring out another sharped, pained sound. They lean further against his body, seeming to stutter and collapse forward. Their hands grip tighter and yank so hard against the back of his sweatshirt that the neck of it digs into the front of his throat. Will tugs and makes another stifled, suffering sound and he hears it all loud and clear: *Keep going.*

He hums and rocks them side to side, a motion he has become familiar with when soothing sniffling, whimpering little ones. Nothing rushed, nothing impatient. He presses his hum into their hair and lets it rumble through his chest. “Our new, little people are amazing. Just like you.”

Will wraps their arms around him and holds on as tight and as close as their belly and their twins within will allow, tucking their face into his neck and sighing, *“Duncan.”*

He's struck through to the heart. Like his lungs just remembered to breathe again. And it hurts just a bit, but in a good way. In a way that reminds him that he’s still alive and reminds him that the world isn’t all just a dull gray. Will is a little bit of everything, always has been. And like Mother Earth or the Big Bang, from everything can come even more possibilities. Evolving, growing, and with imaginations big enough to fit many more worlds and universes.

When Will breathes out a relieved sigh, Duncan does too. A bit of tension unravels its grip on Will’s body and Will’s grip on him. But as they continue to lean on him, he doesn’t let himself falter, only suggesting, “Let’s go back.”

Will nods but doesn’t move much, seeming to turn inwards as they’ve arrived at the feeling they’ve been waiting for. And so, Duncan does the moving for them, slipping their arms from around him and turning to guide them back towards the room they’ve been designated with his arm steady around their waist. The scuff of Will’s shoes against the floor is just a bit louder than before as the weight in Will’s belly has shifted deeper into their hips as it has been doing for a while – or as *they* have been doing.

As Will and Duncan shuffle a few more steps, his eyes flick between the hallway and where Will's hand disappears under the swell of their belly. He remembers the first time he looked at Will's belly and really *understood* that the size and shape showed just how much would need to *get out* and how much work would be involved with that. Truly incredible. And Will has gotten so *big* this time. They wouldn't mind it said. They know it's true. The two of them have discussed just how big Will has gotten late at night when they manage to have time just the two of them. But it never quite clicks the same way it does when the day actually comes:

Will – beautiful, handsome, strong, stubborn Will – needs to push two more brand new people from their body, enduring pain and strain two times over without giving in or giving up.

When they return to their hospital room, the sheets on the bed are still mussed and wrinkled from where Will immediately stood up after being checked over and told everything seemed to be going all right. The only sudden change Duncan would welcome at this point is a splash against the floor. That welcome splash ends up being more of a trickle halfway back to the bed and Duncan only knows what has happened because of Will's quiet *oh.*

"One step closer," Duncan remarks, continuing to guide them beyond the wet spot on the floor and over to the bed. He presses his hand open and palm flat against their spine when they stop short of climbing up and instead bend slightly to capture the bed in their grip. "That's good."

Will might nod or they might just tremble, falling forward to lean braced on their elbows and rocking their hips side to side. As their head falls, curls brush against the blankets and they rock to stand on their tiptoes. It takes a bit of patience to wait until the pain has abated and a bit of maneuvering to change Will out of wet clothes and into dry ones. The maneuvering is made easier by the ease of the hospital gown at least – by design, naturally. Duncan slips the fabric from their shoulders and slips their arm into different sleeves, tying the thin little straps to try to keep it closed for the time being. His fingers brush against their skin, feeling goosebumps, sweat, strain, and strength.

He helps to lift them into bed and, as they take a breather from all the walking, the way that they settle into bed makes them look so small. All the machines, the size of their womb sat atop their frame, their hands smoothing along the surface, when the doctor and nurse come in, they might seem to take some of Will's space too, putting monitors on them at some point and suggesting the moment when Will might consider pain relief. When Will refuses, Duncan isn't surprised. Even though there are moments when they look absolutely miserable, so tired that their nerve endings become sensitive and, by extension, more irritable, and even though they squeeze at his hand but can't bear to be touched any more than that, they still say no to any of it being numbed away.

He sits by while contractions roll through Will, waiting idly by as Will flinches with each coming one and closes their eyes to hide from a pain they can't hide from. And so, when their grip on his hand starts to hurt, he wouldn't dare say a thing about it, wouldn't complain because there's nothing to complain about. He'd happily take whatever pain they could pass along to him. The nurse calls him lucky when a contraction has Will forgetting to breathe and turning red. And it's no news to him that it's a miraculous, impossible stroke of good luck

that he has Will and that Will is so willing to go through this. But there is part of him that wishes he could take more of the pain off their shoulders and the fact that he can't doesn't feel lucky at all.

*"Duncan,"* Will groans as they lie on their side facing him and thereby giving him a clear view of their bright red, tear and sweat-soaked face. Birth is brutal. Will has no choice but to show that loud and clear and Duncan wouldn't want them to waste energy trying to hide it.

"I'm right here," he says, lifting a cup with ice water and a straw and bringing the end of that straw to Will's dry, chapped lips.

Will's knees shift under the blanket as their neck cranes and digs their cheek into a flat hospital pillow. They groan through grinding teeth, "I want to *push."*

Duncan sets the cup aside on a table without a care for how it might wobble, rising to reach across Will and press the button at the other side of their bed. He presses it once, strong and sure and in a flash thinks about how glad he is that such a lifeline is so close by. It allows him that single press and then he can focus instead on pressing his lips to their damp, tacky forehead and his thumbs can rub along their quivering belly. He murmurs against their skin, "Hold on."

"I'm *trying,"* Will says with a hiss and a wince.

"I know," Duncan murmurs, his thumb brushing across their belly button as their legs shift with agitation and their whine tells of desperation too.

After he hears such a sound, each moment until the professionals pour in through the door – however many of those moment there are – feels too long. As time slows, his heart pounds in his chest and he might feel each molecule in the air that flows in and out of his lungs. It's the tension in knowing that one of their babies is on the brink of being here, so close and yet so far away still. Seemingly much like the doctors meant to ensure their safe arrival. He remembers feeling like the doctors couldn't move fast enough when Juni was born – though it seemed like no one could move fast enough for Juni's liking when they were born. These twins might be early but they're taking their time.

Just as it has all happened with time and patience, the doctor and nurses do come and move quickly thereafter, moving them to another room with plastic beds positioned and waiting to put the babies in. They lead Will to turn onto their back and give Duncan his place to stand and the instructions to hold Will's hand and the back of their knee. The other knee, Will holds on their own. When Will pulls hard enough to bring their knees near their elbows, Duncan matches that strength, even if he might worry he's asking too much of their body.

*Push!*

When Will no longer has to hold back, they push with all the might they have left. Their chin tucks to their chest as they curl as much as they can, nearly folded in two around the huge mound of their belly. Will inhales and exhales with the expanding and contracting of their womb, holding their breath as their muscles are tensed and held in a squeezing grip. Their stilted exhale is so haggard that it sends a bit of spit flying and when the tears start dripping

down Will's cheeks, Duncan might feel a telltale sting and blur as his own tears gather and threaten to fall.

*Baby Number One is crowning.*

As the doctor makes the pronouncement, a nurse holds up a mirror for Will to see for themself. And, really, the words pale in comparison to the reality of it. Even for Duncan, *crowning* seems a very brief, abbreviated way to describe this particular moment when the baby is *so close* to coming and when all of Will's laboring, enduring, pushing, and pain has brought their baby's head into the world to the widest point. This is when Will's body, having passed so many tests already with flying colors, is pushed to another limit, when they've surrendered their body for months and are asked to have more generosity to give. This moment serves as a reminder that birth itself is a controlled surrender and Will lends it resilience and grace. It's awe-inspiring.

*Just a bit more!*

He could kiss Will – wants to very badly, in fact. He could press his appreciation to their lips and their sweat-damp skin as love threatens to overwhelm him. It's a love so strong and so acute, he couldn't possibly feel it for too long, only experiencing it in powerful bursts when Will births one of the babies they've made together. It's a love built up week after week, month after month, culminating here and now. But though he could kiss Will until they share in one breath together, he'll have to be patient some more. He'll wait as long as Will needs, keeping all that affection buzzing in his ribcage and around his heart.

*Baby Number One is born.*

A messy, pink baby is pulled up beyond the mound of Will's belly and laid down on their chest. The baby's face screws up and their hands flail as they cry out in that shrill, complaining way that Duncan couldn't be happier to hear. The baby cries and cries as Will's hands hover so carefully before finding their place cradling this little one, two people but still connected by a cord that has yet to be cut. The baby cries and cries to show that they can and, once they've proved that, quiet with the loving, doting, back and forth brush of Will's thumb against their shoulder – only to squawk in protest when jostled by medical professionals who don't seem to feel the need to be quite so delicate. Duncan laughs and smiles big and wide, big enough to show teeth. He can feel it. But he can't stop, not even with all these strangers around.

When contractions pang and build to remind everyone that the work isn't done yet, the first baby is whisked away to one of those prepared beds in a glorified plastic tub that seems akin to the one for Apricity's colored pencils. His eyes trail along as the baby is carried away and linger on their complaining, crying form being rubbed down by people who must do this every day. A squeeze of his hand acts as a tug on his attention, but he still can't help but blink towards the baby that's just arrived, so close and still so far away.

*Baby Number Two is born.*

It only takes a few minutes for the twin to be pushed out and lifted to Will's chest as well, just as pink and just as messy as their newborn sibling. But where the first pea from the pod

frowned and cried out right away, this second one is rubbed harshly by many nurses with hands covered by thin hospital blankets. Not quite as wriggly and not quite as quick to complain, it takes a bit more for this baby to be bothered enough to cry out.

*Baby Number Two is crying.*

The squawking and crying are as much music to his ears the second time as it was the first. With a rhythm all their own, Will's fingers follow the swirl of hair slicked down to the baby's head. There are cheers, instructions, and official timekeeping, but Duncan only has eyes and ears for his family. The rest of him is also devoted only to them, forever and always. His hands are for brushing back Will's hair from their forehead even as his voice struggles to sound out at all.

"Will–" he tries, though he finds tears and a scratchiness keeps the words feeling stuck in his throat. He's not sure he knows what to say anyhow when he tries again: "Will, I–"

"I know," they say anyhow, tipping their head and looking up towards him. They soothe their baby as the little one squawks just a bit more. "I know."

Nurses and doctors might pat his shoulder and tell him congratulations, but none of it matters as much as the look on Will's face. Beyond the pink staining their cheeks and the bags under their eyes to spell out exhaustion, there is affection and love that overcomes it all. The patience paid off. With twins here safe, Duncan leans forward to kiss Will long and slow and gentle.

He carries on petting back their sweaty curls as he rasps, "I love you more than I can say."

With the same care as they brushed their thumb against a baby's soft, new skin, they brush their thumb against Duncan's cheek as they murmur, "And I love you back just the same."

# Chapter 3

After all of the pain and all of the strain, after all the expanding and contracting, after pushing and pushing, after the blood and gunk, it's astonishing to sit in the quiet and find that the product of all of that is so soft and delicate. Hours upon hours of pain to stretch wide enough and push hard enough to bring such a fragile, precious, delicate thing; it would be like if carbon needed pressure to turn into diamonds that were then as breakable as glass. One of these fragile, little treasures reaches up with fingers cushioned by soft skin, never having been cracked, cut, or bruised. Those little fingers swing and sway in open air, lacking enough coordination to grab onto much. But the hold those fingers have on a new spot carved out for them in his heart, *that* hold is a powerful one.

"Looks absolutely fine," the nurse says.

Looks better than *fine.* Amazing, tiny, incredible, small. These twins are the smallest of their babies yet. Juni was the chunkiest by far. Duncan almost chuckles just thinking of it. Juni seemed to barrel right through being born and when they came out big on top of that, it only seemed to add to the legend of it. He's been at the store while Molly told the tale to any customer who took the time to coo over the chunky baby sat behind the counter. Their babies have become a staple at the store. Duncan once made the comparison to a corner store with a live-in cat. Will laughed really hard at that.

"Thank you," Duncan replies.

He watches the nurse do the last of her checks and hovers until it's time to come forward and scoop the baby back into his arms. Their twin has already been dubbed similarly *fine* and given back to Will, who is also *fine* and thankfully free of complications. The pain isn't totally gone and won't be for a while. But Will has been able to achieve something like rest and there's a peacefulness to their expression as they simply lie in bed with one of their babies in their arms.

"I think Brina has your ears," Will muses as they brush a finger along the shape of one of those ears.

Duncan hums as he carries their little one over to take a seat near Will's bedside. He looks at the baby all bundled up in a blanket and with a hat on their head. He studies the scrunched up, pudgy little features, and observes, "Eira might have your nose."

Will sighs, shifts the way they cradle baby Brina in their arms, and reaches out an open hand towards him. As Duncan does the same, it's so easy for such a little bundle to fit seemingly just in the crook of his arm. Will's eyes linger on their baby's sweet little face and their hand squeezes his the same way he feels his heart squeeze in his chest at the sight of them. Will smiles at their babies softly and directs that same soft smile at him.

"Our amazing kids are like you too, you know?" they say.

But Duncan doesn't know how they could be. There aren't many things Duncan associates with himself that he would associate with kids, particularly happy and healthy ones. He's quiet and somber, unexciting and not excitable. Where Will has some subtlety and delicacy to their features – their eyelashes, the slope of their nose, and even the shape of their cheek between sharper cheekbones and jawline – Duncan's features are severe across the board. He doesn't know how he could see such severity in his kids' soft, sweet faces, just like he wouldn't look for them to be subdued.

Will tsks their tongue chidingly and squeezes his hand tight. "Juni runs warm like you," they remark as their thumb brushes against the back of his hand. "Perfect for cuddling under a blanket, comfortable and cozy."

Juni does love a good cuddle. While Apricity prefers to run and explore, Juni still finds some contentment in cuddling on the couch. As they've preferred to cling to Will, Duncan has found a particular miraculousness in the times when Juniper falls asleep against his chest. It's something he cherishes so profoundly that even in those times when the sun rises and the air becomes stuffy with the weight and warmth of a blanket and baby both, he wouldn't dare disturb the moment.

"Apricity is generous," Will continues, chuckling quietly when Brina scrunches their face further and sighs like being a sleeping baby is a lot of work. "She wants to help and she wants to give."

Apricity is about as helpful as a kid can be. While sometimes her helping isn't really all that helpful, she doesn't always have to be helpful to be appreciated. And while they can't keep each and every one of her many drawings, each one is cherished for its own little while. There's one drawing she did of Duncan that he's not sure he'll ever throw away. It's a gift to see himself through her eyes, even if only in broad strokes.

"Our amazing kids love hard like you," Will says, bringing their intertwined hands to their lips and kissing his knuckles. "And they have so much love to give, like you."

Duncan rises from the bedside chair to sit on the edge of the bed instead. He cradles the baby in his arms carefully as he leans forward, doing so slowly and surely so that the baby might feel rocked and not turned upside down. He takes care to not squish either of the babies as he leans close enough to Will for a kiss. Even with all of that to consider, they manage, as they always do. He kisses Will and he feels just how much love he has to give them. It seems endless.

"I need you to know that if our kids are wonderful, it's because of you too," Will whispers just shy of his lips. "I'll keep showing you all the ways until you can really see it."

Duncan hums and presses one more kiss to their cheek as he sits upright again. He glances at Eira to make sure they're still settled and looks back to Will again as he murmurs, "Might take a while."

Will adjusts the hat on Brina's head and assures him, "I have a while."

The knock on the door startles him and he only realizes after the fact that he doesn't need to worry about a cacophony of dog barks waking up the little ones. There's a part of him that dreads the inevitable moment much like this when there's a calm in the storm that gets interrupted by dogs thundering through the house. But even without dogs around, the babies might not get to keep their peace and quiet. While the knock at the door might have been quiet enough to only prompt a twitch or a scrunch of their brows, the group that comes barreling through shortly afterward surely won't be.

"Daddy! Zazzy!" Apricity shouts, tugging on Wally's hand as they walk through the door with Molly and Juni just behind them. When Wally still drags his heels too much for her liking, she lets go of his hand and leaves him behind in favor of sprinting towards Will's bed shouting, "Babies!"

"Za!" Juniper joins in, lurching forward in Molly's arms and reaching their arms out with a huge grin.

Molly laughs as Juni jerks and wiggles, wrapping her arm tighter and steadier around them as she comes closer with much more restraint. "I'll trade you," she offers Will as Juniper makes grabby hands and sharp little noises of excitement and complaint. Molly's laugh is light-hearted as she eases the wiggle worm in her arms onto the bed and tears shine in her eyes as the newborn is transferred to her arms. Molly sniffles and smiles as she rocks the little one from side to side. Her voice wobbles as she admires, "They're beautiful."

"I know," Will teases, scrunching their nose at Juni as the two of them reach towards each other. Juni crawls across the blankets and grabs at Will's fingers as soon as they can, holding on tight even if that means having one fewer hand to crawl with. "Hello again, Perry Berry. Did you miss me?"

Apricity tugs impatiently on Duncan's elbow, yanking so that he might tip forward enough for her to get a good look at her baby sibling. He moves from his perch on the bed to kneeling on the floor so that she can really look to her heart's content. He watches her eyes take in every detail that her clever little mind can find.

"What do you think?" Will asks her.

They all wait – Juni included, babbling nonsense as they cuddle against Will's chest – and Apricity blinks between Will, Duncan, and Eira in his arms. She pouts her lips and considers. She's one step away from tapping her finger against that pout to further reflect her deep thought. But there's no need when she's already made her assessment and states it short and sweet: "Pretty cute."

Everyone laughs – except the twins who carry on sleeping for now. Even Wally gives a chuckle and Juniper giggles along with everyone else. Though the sound is drowned out, Duncan can feel the rumble of the chuckle in his chest and as he presses a kiss to her hair, he presses his smile to her curls too.

"We have a surprise for you," he tells her. He and Will discussed it before they made any phone calls. They had to discuss it in order to decide who it was they would call. Molly was an obvious choice, but anyone beyond that was less of a given.

“A surprise?” Apricity questions, raising her brows curiously.

“We decided you were right,” Will explains, giving Juniper a few pats on the back as they yank on Will’s shirt. Will catches their hand and presses a kiss to the back to still it. They glance from Juniper to Apricity as they continue, “Meeting your baby siblings and your grandpa on the same day would be just the right amount of excitement.”

“My grandpa?” Apricity says with a gasp, squeezing her hands and bringing them to perch under her chin as she twists with excitement and raises up on her tiptoes. “When do we leave?”

“Zazzy and the babies will stay here for a little while longer,” Duncan tells her. “So your grandpa is coming here to meet us.”

That’s what it came down to when the decision was being made. Time and distance were major factors. Will’s father would only be nearby for so long. He could visit today, sometime before he leaves for Virginia, or not at all – the last option being a distinct possibility. Will blamed the decision to let their dad visit on *hormone-fueled sentimentality*. Maybe, maybe not. Whatever it was, Duncan was content to make the phone call and say what he was told to.

“I didn’t bring my coloring,” Apricity objects, shaking her head hard enough to send her curls flying in all directions.

“That’s okay,” Duncan assures her, reaching to tuck one of those unruly curls behind her ear – or at least not right in front of her eye. “We still have it at home. You can give it to him later.”

“Supposed to be a Nice-To-Meet-You present,” she complains, looking towards Molly as she whines, pouts, and stomps her foot.

“Oh, yeah!” Molly says, twisting her body to swing the purse on her hip. She gives a nod to Apricity and another tilt of her hip with a nod to her purse. “Show Zazzy and Daddy the Nice-To-Meet-You present you made for the twins.”

Apricity gives another huff and sigh and scrunches her brow as she stomps her way dramatically to dig her hand in Molly’s purse. She unzips a zipper and pulls out a folded-up piece of paper, holding it in her fingers that still have some soft pudge to them too.

“Let me see it,” Duncan encourages, rising just enough to take the seat by Will’s bed and beckoning towards Apricity and her dragging feet. She shuffles over and places the folded-up piece of paper in his hand. While cradling the baby, it takes a bit of dexterity to unfold the gift with just one hand and the fingers he can spare, but he manages.

Laid out against his knee is a drawing with Apricity's depiction of herself towards the center, of course, and other figures all around her. Varying in size, shape, and hair style, Duncan knows from experience who is meant to be who. With vibrant color and smiles on each and every face – even the twins are like smiling little loaves of bread – the drawing feels so

joyous and full. While there is open space still, Apricity's vision of her world doesn't seem to be lacking.

"Beautiful, baby," he says, looking away from the art and towards the artist. He blinks away from the swirls that depict curls and the pink triangle to represent her dress and, in front of him, he sees the shine and glimmer in the blue of her eyes that she hasn't quite captured yet but surely will someday. He cradles the newborn in his arm a little closer and keeps the drawing balanced on his lap as he asks her, "Can I have a hug?"

Apricity nods and extends her arms outwards. As Duncan wraps one arm around her back, she squeezes hers around his neck with clumsy care, holding tight to make extra sure that this is a hug he feels.

"I'll see if I can find some crayons," Molly offers as she makes her way over to one of the beds left for the twins and carefully lowers the baby in her arms. Her hand lingers to adjust the blanket or a hat and when nothing is found amiss, she looks back at Apricity and suggests, "You can add grandpa to your Nice-To-Meet-You present before he gets here."

"Yes!" Apricity agrees, exclaiming loud enough to have Duncan instinctively glancing towards the sleeping baby in his arms.

"Please," Will prompts and Apricity quickly parrots, *"Please."*

"Well since you said *please,"* Molly teases with a smirk and a wink. Then she looks at Wally – who seems pretty bored by it all – and asks, "Would you like to come along?"

"Thank you, Molly," Will says, looking like they'd be happy with a nap. Their head rests back against their pillow and leaves them with eyes half-lidded and blinking slowly.

Molly's smirk turns sweeter and before she leaves, she presses a kiss to the center of Will's forehead and promises, "Anytime."

It seems that as soon as the door clicks closed behind Molly and Wally and there might be the possibility of a couple fewer people and perhaps a little more quiet, that is of course when the twins make their needs known. They need feeding and changing and cooing over. Apricity hovers nearby and Juni observes from up close, both so curious as they try to figure out what to make of these new siblings. But neither of them seems really sure.

Apricity takes her thoughts to her drawing as soon as Molly returns with a modestly sized box of crayons – and a couple of balloons. Juni tugs on the balloon strings with giggles to delight all the adults in the room and even get a smile out of Wally while he watches a rerun of something on TV. And somehow, the longer Apricity colors the more her drawing seems to come to life. As Duncan sits back and looks at the big picture laid out in front of him, he finds it crowded and in good company. But as Apricity also depicted, there's still space for more.

As the clock ticks, the next person to walk through the door might be Bill Graham or a nurse telling them visiting time is over. Duncan notices Will's eyes glancing at the clock and sees the worry that they'll have to disappoint Apricity all over again. Duncan also sees the tension

in their shoulders that tells Duncan everything he needs to know for certain that Apricity wouldn't be the only one left disappointed. He holds onto Will's hand and tries not to think about how Apricity might forget the day when her grandpa didn't show up, but Will won't. When Apricity shows him her drawing with her grandpa added, he tries not to wish that they'd kept the drawing as it had been, just in case.

When there's a knock at the door, Duncan feels Will's eyes on him. He squeezes their hand and looks back at them as he rises to his feet. He knows disappointment won't break them. Their strength hasn't failed them before and won't now. He'll make sure of it. If they feel rejected, he'll show them how they're loved. If they feel cut off from their roots, he'll show them all the leaves on their tree and the way they're building on their home in the woods. And yet still, on the way to the door his hand might tremble for them.

When that door opens, Duncan is tempted to sigh in relief. When he doesn't, that relief remains brewing in his chest. His shoulders roll back and he stands taller as he holds the door open for Bill Graham and his bouquet of flowers. There are white roses, wooded greenery, and branches with red berries. Duncan then needs to hold back the furrow of his brow as he looks to Will with a question he hopes they can see in his eyes. Even if they can, he can't blame them when the only answer Will can give is a shrug.

"Sorry it took me a while to get here. I couldn't decide–" Bill says, hesitating a few steps into the room. The bouquet shifts a little lower to give him the opportunity to notice just how many people are listening and watching him. He clears his throat and adjusts the bouquet again, freeing up a hand to distractedly brush across his graying stubble. "Picking flowers isn't like picking fishing lures."

"Nice-To-Meet-You present!" Apricity shouts, bolting over to where she'd left her masterpiece once completed. She carries it in both hands as she runs to Duncan's side and peers up at this person who is a stranger and family at once.

"You must be Little Miss Apricity," Bill says, voice rough and gravelly. When he smiles, Duncan thinks that might be the first time he's ever seen that from him. Their reunion at the coffee shop didn't involve a lot of smiling without the damper of a hefty heap of awkwardness.

"Grandpa, look! Your Nice-To-Meet-You present," Apricity says, holding up her drawing way above her head so that her newfound grandpa can get a close look. Duncan silently offers to take the bouquet so that Bill can accept the gift as Apricity so desperately wants him to. As soon as her grandpa holds her present with both his hands, she points right smack dab in the middle and announces, "That's me and that's Zazzy and Daddy and Juni and the twins and Molly and Wally and Rusty…"

Bill's eyes scan the room as Apricity makes introductions by way of her drawing. When his eyes land on Will in their hospital bed with Juni beside them and the twins nearby, he seems stunned into silence. While Apricity lists off their many, many dogs and points to their corresponding shapes in her drawing, Bill seems at a loss for words. It takes him a moment or two after Apricity's long list of characters to realize he was expected to respond. He then pats Apricity's head and says, "Thank you."

“You’re welcome!” Apricity replies, much more loudly and much more easily. She bounces on her toes and nods her head matter-of-factly as she announces, “There’s one at home. We didn’t bring it.”

“I feel spoiled already with this one,” Bill says, his Southern accent adding an extra lilt that softens the sounds. It’s the same lilt that creeps into Will’s speech from time to time. Father looks from grandchild to child and asks Will, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, all things considered,” Will says, absentmindedly pressing their hand to their middle and then grimacing as they’re reminded of the aches and the pains they might prefer to keep out of sight, out of mind. They pull their hand away and look to Juni as an easy distraction, a role they’ll take happily. Will smooths their hand across the hair on Juni’s head that’s gone a bit wild and sticks upright and asks them, “Will you say hi, Juni?”

Juniper exclaims more of a *ha!* than a *hi* but it hardly matters, especially when they wave so big and so happily. Their second child brings a second smile to their grandfather’s face, tilting the mustache that’s grown a bit long over his upper lip and showing crooked teeth stained by years of smoking. There’s something humble and simple about it all, a layer of strangeness and estrangement peeling away and making it easier to see grandfather and grandchild for the simple affection.

“Brina,” Will introduces next, pointing at one of the newborn babies and then points to the twin as they say, “And Eira.”

Bill steps away from Apricity to take a closer look at the twins in their beds and Duncan scoops her into his arms so she won’t feel forgotten about. While Duncan watches Bill step forward and feels like worlds are colliding, Apricity wraps her arm around his neck and squeezes tight.

*“Daddy,”* she whispers in his ear. “My grandpa is here.”

He pats her back and adjusts how he holds her so that she won’t slip down or fall, then murmurs quietly to her, “I know.”

“I gave him my Nice-To-Meet-You present,” she says, whispers getting a bit louder.

“I think he liked it,” he reassures her.

“Really, Daddy?” she asks, so genuinely and with so much heartfelt hope.

Duncan hums and nods. “Really,” he says, holding her close. He presses his cheek to her hair and murmurs, “We need to listen now.”

“Would you like to hold one of the twins?” Will offers to their dad. Their eyes glance between the twins in their plastic bassinets and their dad hovering with his hands by his side, seeming unsure what to do with them.

“If that’s alright–” Bill starts to say, raising his hands out and open.

But then Apricity interrupts, “I want to!”

“We’re lucky there’s two of them,” Will teases with a laugh. They tip their chin and raise their brows as they remind her, “You’ll have to sit down, remember?”

“Why don’t you go sit with Zazzy?” Duncan suggests and when she nods, he carries her over to Will’s bed and lowers her down onto it gently.

She crawls to sit at Will’s side opposite Juni and accepts Will’s kiss to her head. She also accepts Will’s guidance in positioning her arms. Although she held Juni when they were born, she could hardly be expected to remember it and her more recent memories of holding her little sibling wouldn’t be associated with much gentleness now that Juniper enjoys her squeezing hugs. But when Duncan lowers Brina into their sister’s arms, she keeps her hands soft and her arms relaxed. Will takes Juni’s hand and shows them how to *gently* grab the lump of Brina’s foot through the blankets. When Brina’s foot shifts as they scrunch and stretch, Juni squeals the way they did when they felt the kicks while the babies were still in the womb.

Will holds three of their children in their arms, meets their big, blinking eyes with a smile, and encourages their perceptive curiosity. All the while, Duncan sits at the end of the bed and takes it all in. He watches Will whisper to them and doesn’t mind that he can’t hear what’s said. He’s content to simply go on watching from afar. It gives Duncan the opportunity to also watch over Bill holding Eira and wonder if Bill thinks the baby has Will’s nose too. And though Apricity gets bored quickly and would rather go bother Wally, Eira sleeps in their grandfather’s arms even after their twin has returned to their temporary bed and Juni’s joined in on the nap too.

Bill brushes his finger against the tiny, delicate ones that have snuck their way out of the blanket. As brand new, little fingers curl around just one of his and barely seem big enough to wrap all the way around, he states, “I didn’t protect you like I should have.”

Will looks first at Duncan and then towards their father, starting and then hesitating as they say, “Dad–”

“I didn’t make life easier on you like I should have,” Bill carries on with a shake of his head. He looks Will right in the eye, unflinching and not hiding away, as he says, “I would like to make life easier on you now in whatever way I can.”

“Thank you,” Will states, short, sweet, and so *sincere.* Their lips wobble and tears glisten in their eyes as they say, “That means a lot.”

“Well,” Bill says as tears might glisten in his eyes too. And although he seems reluctant to do so, he rises to his feet and places Eira back in their bed. As his hands hang awkwardly by his side once again, Duncan starts to understand that Bill might be wishing he could still be holding a sweetly slumbering baby and that the peace to be found there didn't have to be interrupted. Bill grips his hands together in front of him and smiles tightly as he remarks, “I’ll make it easy on you now and leave you to yourselves.”

“Thanks for coming,” Will says and they might look about ready to admit that they’ll miss their dad and even maybe that they’ve missed him all along.

“Anytime,” Bill replies, using one awkward hand to pat Will’s arm.

Just as Duncan opened the door to let him in, he feels similarly pulled to see Bill out. Apricity makes sure to give her grandpa a hug before he leaves, as well as ensuring he didn’t leave without his present. Bill shows her that the drawing has been folded up and tucked away into his wallet, giving her the twenty-dollar bill that had been there and saying it’s to make room. After she rushes off to show Wally her riches, Duncan and Bill stop just beyond the door, just the two of them.

“I’m glad to have met you. And extra glad to have been wrong about you,” Bill says. He coughs and clears his throat, looking away as he pats Duncan on the shoulder a time or two. His voice goes rough and his accent thickens with the sound caught in his throat as he says, “You’re the family man I never was.”

Bill coughs one more time to clear his throat and winces in another approximation of a smile before turning away. His hands are shoved in his pockets and his head ducked as he makes his way down the hallway, moving in between the staff, patients, and visitors all alone. As Duncan watches him go, he’s struck by what could have been. The thought lingers in his mind that he could have ended up walking a path all on his own, ducking and dodging away from those that might come too close. Later, when he’s woken throughout the night, he thinks of the empty hallway just beyond the door and each time he falls back asleep, he’s grateful he has Will’s hand to hold onto.

# Chapter 4

“Whose turn is it?” Molly asks, voice lilting with playful excitement.

She sits on the couch in Will and Duncan's living room and around the tree Duncan brought home one night when he came home from work. There are far too many children and dogs living under this roof and running around this tree to risk glass ornaments or even twinkly lights. Apricity sprints, Juniper runs with a wobble, and the twins are crawling, so it seemed wisest to sacrifice some ambiance. But the spirit isn't lost. Apricity made drawings to insert into plastic ornaments and there are stuffed and felt ones too, a couple of which might be a bit damp from slobber.

“Me!” Juniper calls out, shuffling on their knees and bringing their new plastic piggy bank with them. Duncan had to do all the deconstruction to pry the toy out of the box and get the batteries in it, but it wasn’t too bad all things considered. He knows Apricity is getting a toy or two that will be a particular pain to get out of the box.

“Not yet,” Will says with a laugh, rising from the couch to reach for a plastic coin. They hand the coin to Juni and Duncan can already see Juni sitting behind the counter by the register with their coin and piggy bank.

“It’s youngest to oldest,” Apricity instructs Juni with a wag of her finger and thoughtful pout.

Wally sighs where he’s slumped on the couch by his mom. “Juni doesn’t even know what *oldest* and *youngest* mean.”

“Alright, Mr. Smart Guy,” Molly teases with the nudge of her hand against the arms crossed over his chest. “Why don’t you tell us who’s next?”

Wally rolls his eyes at his mom but his smirk becomes more and more like a regular smile as he says, “Me.”

Molly smiles big and wide as she encourages, “Hurry up and pick one then.”

Wally pushes himself off the couch and approaches the tree, stepping around people and presents to find which one he’ll select. He picks up one present, which is in fact two presents tied together with a bow. Will has become very experienced in wrapping presents as more and more people have come into the store to buy stocking stuffers that they then request Will wrap each and every one. If Will ever seemed close to quitting their job at Molly's store, it would be at this time of year. Each year they’ve changed their mind shortly after New Year's, but time will only tell if this year is the same.

Wally unties the bow and tears through the paper that he must recognize very well. He’s done his share of wrapping too. The paper falls away and Duncan scoops it off the ground to toss in the trash bag instead. Wally doesn’t notice that at all. He’s too busy turning a box in his hand that reads: *Create-A-Lure.*

“I know you have your dad’s tackle box and rods,” Will explains and only Duncan might know how desperately they want to have gotten this gift right. They sit forward, tug on their plaid button-up, and brush their fingers through the hair they’re still getting used to having cut shorter. “But I wasn’t sure if he ever taught you how to make your own lures,” they continue. “Like my dad taught me.”

Will glances at Bill sitting in the wingback chair that he’s been sitting in since he walked in the door. Eira has kept him settled there as they’ve claimed his lap for a good sleeping spot. It’s an affection and a comfort that has carried on, starting just after Eira was born and resuming whenever Bill visits. It’s an affection and a comfort that feels like starting over. The twins don’t know anything different from the grandpa who adores them. It’s a reminder that not everything has to carry on and that they can pick and choose what past to leave behind. And Apricity has been perfectly happy to make up for lost time. She asked to call her grandpa once and then decided to make it a regular occurrence.

Wally sets down the box and walks over to give Will a hug as he murmurs, “Thank you, Will.”

“You’re welcome,” Will says, hugging him back tight. As their chin hooks over his shoulder, they have a direct eye line towards their dad.

With their hair cut as short as it is, Duncan might start to see some of the resemblance. Bill has a more rugged, haggard look to him. He looks like a man who has worked in the elements – rain, drought, snow, heat. And while Will certainly can certainly shovel snow with the best of them, they might not show it so plainly on their face. The similarity to be found now lies in how shorter hair shows off the angle of their jaw and the shape of their ears – as well as the tilt.

“Who’s next?” Molly asks, almost with the same lilt except for the way it wobbles. She smiles just as big even with tears in her eyes.

“Me!” Juni calls out again, raising the big plastic coin as if making a bid. They crash the coin into the slot on the piggy bank and it plays a little tune.

“Not yet,” Will reminds them with another laugh, reaching over to scoop them up, piggy bank and all.

Molly tsks her tongue in sympathy for Juni’s plight at having to be patient. “Maybe we should just let the kids have their free-for-all.”

“Juni is the only one trying to skip the line,” Will remarks, as they kiss the back of Juni's head where the hair at the cowlick lies at an odd angle.

“Are you sure?” Duncan questions with the raise of his brow and tip of his head towards a little girl snooping around the tree to pre-select her next present. She tips her head up and down and twists her neck to search the labels on the presents for her name. “Apricity,” he calls out to get her attention. His lips twitch with a smile when she startles either from getting caught or being yanked out of her train of thought. “It’s Zazzy’s turn to open a present. Why don’t you help them pick?”

Apricity smiles and nods, clasping her hands together and walking over to where she knows there's a box tucked away. It's a box with haphazard wrapping, both Duncan and Apricity being equally talented in that regard. But the wrapping paper is a drawing made by the little artist herself and that's better. She brings the box to Will and sets it on their knee.

"Thank you, Santa's Little Helper," Will says as they carefully peel the tape and try not to rip the paper too much.

With all the tape that was used, it might be a lost cause. But Will can be absolutely precise when the situation requires it, like when making lures and waiting for a fish to tug on the line. Once the paper has been carefully peeled back, there is a box. And in that box are little plastic toy dogs, a variety of them. One is a little terrier, another a big gray dog.

"What's this?" Will asks, with a smile on their face. They pick up a plastic dog that looks like Rusty. As they find each one, the little figures are added to the growing collection in their hands. They search through the tissue paper for another one and find a miniature version of Winston with a silver ring hanging around his neck like a much too big collar. Will looks at Duncan as they remove the ring from over the plastic dog's head and they ask, "What's this?"

"An engagement ring," he answers, feeling his heart thud in his chest. "If you like it."

*"If I like it,"* Will repeats with a scoff and a smile. Will shakes their head and, with the hand not holding the ring in question, they thread their fingers in the hair at the back of his head. They guide him close enough to murmur in his ear just for him, *"I love you."*

"Will you marry me?" he asks and though he's known without a shadow of a doubt that they will be together until the end of his days, there's still a catch in his throat as vulnerability will always make itself known.

"Yes," Will answers. *"Yes."*

And as much as Duncan had known that would be the answer, he's overwhelmed with an emotion he can't quite describe. He only knows that it has all tension leaving his body. All vulnerability and worry disappear away as muscles relax with trust that unwinding doesn't mean falling apart. Will stops just shy of kissing him and holds on tight, keeping him suspended in the private intimacy they still manage to find even now that they are no longer alone – very much the opposite.

"Zazzy and Daddy are going to get married!" Molly cheers, which prompts a shout from Apricity and then a squeal from Juniper in a cacophonous cascade of dominos.

Will laughs and kisses Duncan's cheek where he can feel it burning, maybe even bright pink. He ducks his head and out of the corner of his eye, catches sight of Bill helping Brina to clap while Eira sleepily rubs their fist against their eye. As Eira's lip starts to wobble, they look to their twin to decide if they should wail. But Bill jostles the twins on his knees and Brina topples over against their grandpa's belly, letting out a peel of giggles and making Eira forget that they were considering crying.

“Daddy’s turn for a present now,” Will announces, slipping the ring onto their finger and setting that hand on his knee. On the silver of that ring glimmers the glint from candles they lit and set very far away from the reach of curious, little hands. But maybe that’s just to Duncan’s eye.

“I’ll get it!” Apricity exclaims.

She skips off in her Christmas dress and finds the biggest present under the tree – the one she’s been eyeing since Molly brought it in when she and Wally arrived. Apricity teeters a little bit when she picks the present up, but she wraps her arms around the big rectangular box and carries on, bringing the gift all the way to his waiting arms.

“Thank you,” he says as he works his fingers under the wrapping paper folded neatly on the side.

“You’re welcome, Daddy!” Apricity replies, hovering and observing as he tears through the paper with much less care than Will had but without the same urgency that had Apricity tearing apart paper in the blink of an eye.

Underneath the paper is a box and within that box is tissue paper. The paper crinkles as he peels it back and finds a sturdier fabric underneath. Although, the last time he same this fabric, he remembers it being more delicate. His fingers spread across the receiving blanket that came home with one of the twins when they left the hospital. It’s been stitched alongside Eira’s old *Little Fisher* onesie and Brina’s matching *I’m a Keeper,* including the little cartoon fish. He finds more and more fabric and more and more pieces of their family sewn side-by-side. There are Apricity’s drawings, Juni’s scribbles, and splats and blotchy handprints with the twins’ names written underneath. There’s so much to see that he knows he’ll have to take time later to really see all of it and take it all in.

For now, he looks at Molly and he hopes that she understands that, like this beautiful quilt came tucked away in a box, his words carry a meaning that could unfold and unravel into much more when he says, “Thank you, Molly.”

“I drew the pictures!” Apricity insists, lest she be overlooked.

“I can see that,” he assures her, petting his fingers over one of her works of art on the quilt – a drawing of the dogs. “They’re beautiful.”

Apricity smiles and hugs her arms around one of his. “I helped the twins with their, um,” she says, hesitating as she tries to think of the word she’s forgotten. She rubs her cheek against his shoulder as she thinks for a moment and then as soon as she’s able shouts, “Handprints!”

“Miss Priss,” Will says, smirking as they give Apricity a wink and suggest, “It’s Molly’s turn and I think there’s a present missing from the Christmas tree.”

Apricity gasps and gives a big, bright smile. “Now?”

“Now,” Will agrees with a nod of their head and reaching out the hand with their ring. “Let’s go find it.”

Apricity takes their hand and then yanks and tugs as she pulls them towards the room towards the back where the dog beds have accumulated to create a sort of dog den out of one of the new rooms in their expansion on the little house in the woods. Will and Apricity disappear behind the door only to reappear a short time later with a great big brown dog – maybe a boxer. Will had said which breed but Duncan doesn't remember for sure.

"It's a puppy!" Juniper exclaims as they did when they first saw the dog and have every time ever since even though this dog is much too big and much too old to still technically qualify. That hardly matters to Juni. Hardly matters to Will either.

*"You didn't,"* Molly says, though she smiles all the while. She glances at Wally and they both rise from the couch to pet the dog, giving him some scratches by the collar with a bow affixed to it like a present.

"You said you wanted a dog," Will reminds her with the teasing raise of a brow. They kneel and pat Molly's new dog on the back and introduce, "Meet Randy."

"Randy!" Molly exclaims with a laugh big, strong, and loud enough to throw her head back.

She gives another laugh when Randy sighs and sits. Now that he no longer needs to hide away and remain a surprise – not that he seemed to be complaining – Randy sits on the floor by Molly's feet. And so does Wally. While Will and Duncan's dogs mill around, sniffing and begging for treats, Randy and Wally sit together and settle in. That might make Molly's smile even bigger than her laugh had been and brings just as much joy to the room.

"Who's next?" she asks much more quietly as she affectionately pets the back of Wally's head.

"Last but not least–" Will starts to say.

But, of course, Apricity rushes and interrupts, "Grandpa!"

As the attention shifts to Bill, he shifts in his seat, curling his arms around the twins so they won't fall over – though Eira looks ready to nod off again. Bill clears his throat and his mustache flutters as he asks, "Will you pick a present for me, Little Miss?"

Apricity would be more than happy to. Even when she picks a rather cumbersome present, she hauls it over to her grandpa with a smile on her face. Her brow might wrinkle as she stumbles, but she manages to plop the gift by her grandpa's feet. It's a great big present bag decorated with snow-covered trees that stands as tall as Bill's knees.

Bill looks at the twins, who have no intention of budging, and suggests to Apricity, "Will you help me open it?"

Apricity needs no further invitation. She pulls out tissue paper and reaches her arms into the bag until they disappear up to the shoulder. She might seem to nearly dive in headfirst but manages to bring her head back above water and bring with her a welcome mat – though she holds it backwards.

“Can you show Grandpa what it says?” Will encourages, gesturing with their hands for her to turn the mat around. When Apricity turns the mat as instructed, they all can see the outline of Montana in black and the words: *Welcome Home.* Will sits forward and looks to their dad as they explain, “We wanted you to have something to help your new house feel like home.”

When Bill smiles, his mustache buries some of the shape but there might still be a family resemblance. Just like Will, his smile might wobble as his eyes might glisten with tears. He clears his throat, but the rasp and waver cling to his voice as he says, “Thank you.”

Will’s eyes flit between their dad’s expression and the twins clinging to him, comfortable and content. “You’re welcome,” they say, and Duncan knows just how deeply and profoundly they mean it.

There are a few more rounds of presents to open with more joy and gratitude to share in, just like they share in a good Christmas meal and all tuck in for a good Christmas nap. Molly and Wally sleep on a pull-out couch with Randy snoring on the floor. Since their grandpa fell asleep in the chair in front of the TV, the twins allowed themselves to be tucked into their cribs. Duncan tucked Apricity into bed under her Big Sister Blanket and brought his own Christmas gift to spread out over the bed. Apricity’s very first unicorn shirt is sewn in a square that bunches by Will’s cheek when they cuddle underneath the quilt. When Duncan lies down alongside them, he pulls the quilt tighter around them both, nearly the same as the way their kids were once snuggled in the blankets that have been sewn together to be saved and cherished forever more.

Will and Duncan let silence envelope them just as much as the fabric does, breath slowing, so quiet and peaceful that their heartbeats might be the loudest sound. Will’s head tucks against his neck and Duncan's eyes slip closed, resting his chin against their curls and holding them close.

“I’ve felt as good as married to you for a long time,” Will whispers as their arm holds him tighter and their fingers grip his sweatshirt. Their sigh blooms as a warmth against his throat that has him shivering and he shudders when they give the goosebumps on his neck a kiss. Their lips brush his skin lightly as they murmur, “Maybe since Apricity was born.”

“Forged in fire,” he remarks with a hum. “Or a snowstorm.”

Will laughs, sound and sensation kept with care within the quilt. “Maybe we’ll have to have a winter wedding too.”

“Whatever you like,” he replies. As his eyes close, the possibilities flit through his imagination. Maybe winter, maybe fall. Maybe Will in a suit or a dress. Apricity acting as the flower girl, maybe holding Juni’s hand as they both sprinkle flower petals behind them. Then, with his knowledge of weddings exhausted, he’d leave it to Will to figure out where the twins could fit in. “So long as you meet me at the end of the aisle.”

Will uncurls the fingers of one hand, pulling away from where they’ve gripped his sweatshirt to press their hand with the ring flat against his chest right over his heart that beats for them. “Best gift I’ve ever been given.”

Duncan presses a kiss to their hair and muses, “The gift that keeps on giving.”

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!